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THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN ACTS, AND THE “CITY OF GOD”

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The idea of a Messianic kingdom pervades the whole of Acts. It is the subject of the discourse of the Risen Lord who speaks to his disciples “the things concerning the kingdom of God,” and the disciples ask him if he will “restore the kingdom to Israel” in their time.¹ In the prayer of the Apostles, when they quote the words of the Second Psalm “the kings of the earth set themselves in array,” they are evidently regarding these as the natural antagonists of the Christ.² When Peter preaches to Cornelius he says that Jesus of Nazareth was anointed by God and went about doing good (εὐεργετῶν, a word applied to kings) and healing those under the rule (καταδυναστευομένους) of the devil, as though Satan were a rival prince.³ Paul declares to the Jews at Pisidian Antioch that God raised up David as king, and that Jesus “whom God raised from the dead” is the heir of the promise made to David’s son, who, unlike his ancestor, “saw not corruption.”⁴ Later at Thessalonica Paul was accused to the magistrates of proclaiming Jesus to be “another king” in opposition to Cæsar’s decrees.⁵ When Paul alludes to his preaching to the elders of Ephesus at Miletus he calls it “preaching the kingdom of God.”⁶ This is

¹ Acts 1 3, 6.

² Acts 4 25, 26.

³ Acts 10 38; cf. Lk. 22 25, οἱ ἐξουσιάζοντες αὐτῶν (sc. Gentiles) εὐεργέται καλοῦνται. It was applied to the Ptolemies and Seleucidæ (Ptolemy VII and Antiochus VII were so called), and to other public benefactors. Deismann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 248 E. T.

⁴ Acts 13 37.

⁵ Acts 17 7; cf. Luke 22 3, Χριστὸν βασιλέα εἶναι.

⁶ Acts 20 25, 31.

entirely in accord with the parables in the Synoptists where Jesus compares himself to a king,⁷ and with the four narratives of the Crucifixion⁸; but in the Pauline Epistles there is no such allusion to Jesus. The words *βασιλεὺς* and *βασιλεία* are applied generally to the Father.⁹ Nor does Paul as a rule compare the Christian polity to a "kingdom," but to a country, a family, a household or body.¹⁰ So far as may be judged by his silence, a Messianic king had no place in his system. Paul, it is true, alludes to Christ's Davidic descent, but only to contrast his birth "according to the flesh," with the proclamation of his divine sonship "according to the spirit of sanctification" at the resurrection.¹¹ It might be maintained that Paul resolutely preserved silence concerning a kingdom in his eschatology with which in his reported speeches Acts is not disposed to credit him. The Christology of the Pauline Epistles, earlier as well as later, transfers the rule of Jesus from earth to the sublime abode of the heavenly powers,¹² agreeing with the Johannine teaching that his kingdom is "not of this world."¹³

In early patristic literature it does not appear that the idea of Christian hope being connected with a kingdom of Jesus as Messiah appealed much to believers, whose attention was devoted to other aspects of his mission. In the letter to Diognetus and in the Syriac hymn of the

⁷ Matt. 18 23 ff., 22 7 ff.

⁸ All the accounts agree that Jesus was crucified as King of the Jews. The Fourth Gospel explains that Christ's kingdom is "not of this world;" John 18 36.

⁹ *Βασιλεὺς* is never used as a divine title except in 1 Tim. 1 17, 6 15; *βασιλεία*, Rom. 14 17, 1 Cor. 4 20, Col. 4 11 (the Christian dispensation), 1 Cor. 6 9, Gal. 5 21, 1 Thess. 2 12, 2 Thess. 1 5 (the inheritance of the saints). Only in Eph. 5 5, Col. 1 13, is the kingdom connected with Christ. In 1 Cor. 15 24 Christ delivers the kingdom at the end to God, even the Father.

¹⁰ Πατριὰ, Eph. 3 15 (but see J. A. Robinson's note), πολίτευμα, Phil. 3 20, πρὸς τοῦς οὐρανοῦς τῆς πύστεως. The conception of a heavenly state is characteristic of Stoicism. See Lightfoot on Phil. 3 20; Dill, Roman Society, p. 324.

¹¹ Rom. 1 3. Contrast Lk. 1 32, "He shall sit on the throne of David his father."

¹² Col. 1 15 ff. Eph. 4 10, etc.

¹³ John 18 36.

Soul the Father is the king and the Son his delegate; but it was not till the capture of Rome by Alaric in A.D. 410 that Augustine brought into prominence the doctrine that the Church was a State established upon earth in contrast with the kingdoms of this world. To appreciate the meaning of his teaching which had so powerful an influence on subsequent Christian thought, it is necessary to review the argument of the *De Civitate Dei*, a treatise whose title is better known than its contents, which somewhat belie the suggestiveness of the name affixed to them.¹⁴ Alaric's capture of Rome in A.D. 410 was a calamity the effect of which cannot be properly estimated by its immediate consequences. Rome had for generations been merely the titular capital of the Empire, nor was its so-called sack an overwhelming catastrophe. But it naturally stirred the imagination. It seemed the precursor of the ruin of the entire civilized world. Men were appalled at the thought that a barbarian army had entered "golden Rome," the nursing mother of the nations.¹⁵ To the pagans it appeared a sure sign that the gods whom Christianity had displaced had abandoned Rome to its fate, and a reaction in favor of the old religion was the result.¹⁶ To counteract this Augustine devoted thirteen years to the development of the idea of a *Civitas Dei* existing from the creation on earth, a perfect state contrasted with the evil polity of the world. But in the seventeen books of his treatise the description of the Divine State occupies but little space, most of the work being devoted to answering the current objection that Christianity was responsible for the world-

¹⁴ The late Dr. Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders*, Vol. I, Part II, p. 803, after doing justice to the conception of Augustine, adds, "It may be said that the book is less than its title."

¹⁵ *Primum urbes inter divom domus aurea Roma. And
Hæc est quæ gremio materno numine fovet.*

¹⁶ This is the main argument of the early books of the *De Civitate Dei*. The elaborateness of Augustine's refutation of heathenism is a proof of its strength even though the Empire was nominally Christian.

ruin, apparent in the fall of Rome, and to the refutation of heathenism generally. In the first ten books the city of God is hardly mentioned, nor does the name, *Civitas Dei*, occur after the first chapter till the fifth book.¹⁷ Augustine labors to show that the troubles of his age are no worse than were endured in former ages; that the Goths, Arians though they were, treated the city of Rome with a humanity not known in pre-Christian times.¹⁸ He exposes the non-moral character of paganism and the badness of the ancient Roman religion.¹⁹ He shows that the greatest and most victorious nations are not necessarily the happiest, discusses natural and civil theology, deals with Hermes Trismegistus, Apuleius, and Porphyry, and declares Platonism to be the best philosophy of the ancient world.²⁰ He explains the Christian doctrine of angels and demons,²¹ dilates on the freedom of the will, and draws a comparison between the history of the world and that of God's chosen race.²² In short, so many topics are advanced and so much of the theology characteristic of the author is introduced that the City of God seems in danger of falling into the background.

After showing that the great prosperity of the ancient Romans was due to the virtues which they practised and not to their religion, the Eternal City is contrasted with the City of Rome: "No man is born in it because no man dies in it. It is in heaven and we have a promise of it during our pilgrimage on earth."²³ We give the name of the City of God," he says in a later book, "unto that society whereof that Scripture bears witness, which has got the most excellent authority and preëminence of all other works whatsoever, by the disposing of the divine

¹⁷ De Civitate Dei, V, 16.

¹⁸ Ibid. I, 1.

¹⁹ Ibid. II, 4 ff., and III, 2 ff.

²⁰ Ibid. VIII, 1-2.

²¹ Ibid. IX, passim.

²² Ibid. XVI, passim.

²³ Ibid. V, 16. *Illa civitas sempiterna est: ibi nullus oritur, quia nullus moritur.*

providence, not the affection of man's judgments."²⁴ In this world the "two cities lie confusedly together,"²⁵ and Augustine shows that they arose "from the difference between the angelical powers."²⁶ In elaborating his theory Augustine deals with the fall of the angels and the creation, all leading up to the statement that "in the first man the foresaid two societies or cities, had original; yet not evidently, but unto God's prescience, for from him were the rest of men to come; some to be made fellow-citizens with the angels in joy, and some with the devils in torment, by the secret but just judgment of God."²⁷ The early narrative of Scripture shows the two cities to be characterized by phases of mind each caused by a different sort of love: "self-love in contempt of God, . . . and love of God in contempt of oneself."²⁸

Among men the two cities began with the posterity of Adam; Cain, the first builder of a city whose name means possession representing the worldly, and Abel the heavenly state.²⁹ Following Paul, Augustine applies the stories of Hagar and Ishmael, Sarah and Isaac to illustrate his thesis.³⁰ He concludes this part of his argument by emphasizing his peculiar doctrine of reprobation and election.³¹

From the remainder of the treatise a few selected passages will reveal the character of the *Civitas Dei* as set forth by Augustine. It is only in part on earth, its true home being heaven, and its earthly citizens are but pilgrims.³² The bliss of its true citizens in this world is hope, and it is contrasted with the City of the Wicked,

²⁴ De Civitate Dei, XI, 1. Civitatem Dei dicimus cujus ea scriptura testis est, quæ non fortuitis motibus animorum, sed plane summæ dispositione providentiæ super omnes omnium gentium litteras, omnia sibi genera ingeniorum humanorum divina excellens auctoritate subiecit.

²⁵ Ibid. In hoc interim sæculo perplexas quodammodo . . . invicemque permixtas.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. XII, 27. Quamvis occulto dei judicio, sed tamen iusto.

²⁸ Ibid. XIV, 28.

²⁹ Ibid. XV, 5.

³⁰ Ibid. XV, 2.

³¹ Ibid. XVIII, 21.

³² Ibid. XIX, 17.

where God does not govern and men do not obey.³³ "The day of judgment which will come at the end will not however be so much a day of deliverance or even one on which judgment is meted out, but of the vindication of all God's judgments since the Creation." "When we come to that great judgment, properly called the day of doom . . . we shall not only see all things apparent but acknowledge all the judgments of God from the first to the last to be firmly grounded on justice."³⁴ The last two books treat, the first the punishment of the wicked, refuting all the arguments against its being eternal, and also the objections to the flesh becoming eternal at the Resurrection in order that it may be everlastingly punished; and the second, of the happiness of the righteous in heaven their true home, the real City of God.

The importance of the treatise of Augustine, in which he develops his idea of the City in God, lies in its being the matured outcome of the thought of perhaps the greatest of the Fathers, who certainly did more than any one to mould the ideals, not only of the Middle Ages, but also of the Reformation. No one can fail to be struck by the absence of the influence of the aspect of Christianity to be found in the Synoptists and the Acts. In the first place, there is no allusion to a kingdom, in the Hebraic sense. Those whom God has chosen belong rather to a State (*Civitas*, *πολιτευμα*), an essentially Pauline conception. With Augustine and with western Christianity, which he so profoundly influenced, Paul, and not the earlier gospel teaching, was the dominant factor. The approaching kingdom became a "State," which had existed since the fall of the angels and united

³³ De Civitate Dei, XIX, 19, 24.

³⁴ Healey's translation of De Civitate Dei, XX, 2. Cum vero ad illud dei iudicium venerimus, cuius tempus proprie dies iudicii, et aliquando dies domini nuncupatur; non solum quaecumque tunc iudicabuntur, verum etiam quaecumque ab initio iudicata, et quaecumque usque ad illud tempus adhuc iudicanda sunt, apparebunt esse iustissima.

the seen with the unseen. The hopes which Jesus had aroused are deferred; the Second Coming is not a vital part in the scheme, except in so far that it will ultimately destroy the City of Evil. Even the Old Testament is treated less as a source of Messianic proof-texts than as by its narrative demonstrating the continuity of revelation in history.

But this change of outlook is not to be placed in the days of Augustine. It is due rather to Paul. Whether as compositions the Synoptists and Acts are earlier or later than the Pauline letters does not affect the fact that in them the doctrine of the Messianic kingdom is more primitive than that of Paul, who, especially in the later Epistles, makes it more and more centred in a spiritualized Church. In this Augustine strictly follows Paul; for, at any rate in the *De Civitate Dei*, to him, as to the Apostle, the Church is the City of God which has existed from creation both as visible and invisible. Even the calamities of his age cannot make Augustine turn to the Messianic hopes of a cruder Christianity. At the same time he does not advance beyond Paul in his theory of the Church. The *Civitas Dei* is simply the *πολιτευμα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς* of the Epistle to the Philippians. It is in no sense a part of the secular State, an *imperium in imperio*, nor does it claim the right to dictate. Like Paul, Augustine teaches submission to the government, and Christians must now suffer, as in the early Church, when their conscience forbids them to obey. In this treatise there is no trace of any mediæval or post-Reformation theory of Church and State, nor is the Christian hierarchy more than alluded to. Still more significant is it that the words of Christ are rarely quoted and he is not regarded as either a teacher or example to mankind, but as the deified Saviour.³⁵ It is hardly an exaggeration to affirm that the entire theory

³⁵ *De Civitate Dei*, IX, 15.

might have been maintained and developed by a theologian who had completely disregarded the Synoptic narrative. Even in the description of the final vision in the Celestial City Christ is not introduced. This mixture of orthodox Nicene theology with what is practically an unitarian piety is present here and in many another early *Summa* of Christian doctrine. Of the Messianic kingdom set forth in early Christian writings scarcely a trace remains. Augustine seems to have been far more influenced by the Stoic idea of a heavenly State than by the promises of Jesus or the hopes of his immediate disciples. His "City of God" does not seem in any way to have Christ as the centre of all. Unconsciously the tendency has been to move away from the Christianity of the Synoptists, the Acts, and the Apocalypse.